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## Honors Student's Compost Program Aims to Keep Waste out of Landfills

*Apr-06-2010*

Stephani Pescitelli wants to make the world a better place than when she found it, and that's why, even in her hectic final months as an Eastern Illinois University student, she has worked to start a compost program on campus.

In a pilot run of the program, she found that composting in even just one dining center could potentially keep 500 lbs. of organic waste out of landfills each week, helping not only the environment, but EIU's waste-hauling budget as well. As an added bonus, the composted material would be used for landscaping.



Stephani Pescitelli, left, has received enthusiastic help with a pilot study of a compost program from the Thomas Dining Center staff, including (from left) Diane Wilke, Renee Kerz and Mary Collins.

Pescitelli's inspiration was a similar program at Humboldt State University in Northern California, where she was enrolled for a semester as part of the National Student Exchange. In addition to recycling bins often seen elsewhere, the HSU campus had receptacles for items that could be composted.

"It just makes so much sense to collect organic waste like you would items for recycling," Pescitelli said. "I wanted to bring some of the energy and inspiration back to my home school."

Pescitelli, a Presidential Honors student, is no stranger to making a difference. She has been involved in fair trade and social justice activism via several service organizations, including the Newman Center's Haiti Connection.

She is also no stranger to the topic of biodegradation. One of her research projects, about the use of paper waste in cultivating mushrooms, was funded by a \$3,000 grant from the Honors College.

So when she returned to EIU with the idea for a compost program, she secured an internship with EIU's Office of Energy and Sustainability and put her enthusiasm and knowledge to work.

In the Thomas Dining Center, the location of the pilot study, most of the composted items came from the salad bar preparation area. Paper towels were also included, as the carbon they contain helps to balance out the nitrogen-rich vegetables. Prohibited items include dairy, oil and meat products, as they would attract pests.

Pescitelli lauded the staff -- "the actual ones doing the work" -- for enthusiastically participating in the project and taking ownership in it.

Salad bar cook Mary Collins, who has been composting in her yard for about 30 years, said she was "very, very excited about" the program. The project doesn't require a lot of extra work by the staff, she said.

"It's just a matter of putting something in a compost bin instead of putting it in a garbage can," Collins said. "Everybody's very happy about it, because we don't like to waste anything. This is just another step in the university's commitment to being environmentally friendly."

Ryan Siegel, EIU's energy and sustainability coordinator, agreed.

"It's a great step forward to allow us to do more for our environment and send less to a landfill," Siegel said. "If it works out that the system is cost-effective, it will bring us one step closer to the president's goal of recycling or diverting 1.6 million pounds of material per year from the university."

Although Pescitelli is already busy working on designing a composting bin and finding a location for it before she graduates with a degree in environmental biology, she still has one more project she'd like to tackle before leaving campus: the planning of a campus community garden.

In recent years, various people on campus have discussed the possibility of such a garden, and one of Pescitelli's goals is to bring those people together to make that dream a reality.

"A campus garden would offer the opportunity for students to learn how to grow their own food and make connections between food systems, health and sustainability," she said.

After graduating in May, Pescitelli will begin an internship with Troy Gardens, which includes community gardens, an organic farm, and restored prairie and woodlands in Madison, Wisc. The following year, she hopes to pursue a doctorate and eventually engage in a career focusing on sustainable living.

"I tell people that my dream job would be to do mushroom cultivation in Haiti," Pescitelli said. "That is close to my heart."